

Life and Labours
OF
DUNCAN MATHESON,

THE SCOTTISH EVANGELIST.

BY THE
REV. JOHN MACPHERSON.

“REALITY IS THE GREAT THING: I HAVE ALWAYS SOUGHT REALITY.”

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CHAPTER III.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE.

“He knoweth the way that I take; when He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”—*Job* xxiii. 10.

“I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek more earnestly His face.

“’Twas He who taught me thus to pray.
And He I trust has answered prayer;
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair.”

You have seen a bright week of too early spring. The sun has suddenly poured down an unusual warmth. The brooks and streams emancipated from the frost begin to babble afresh. The little birds are full of joy, and warble a welcome to the genial year. The buds are swelling, here and there a flower peeps out, and the first tint of greenness is upon the earth. Unexpectedly the sun, as if he had but mocked, withdraws his smiling favours; frost, as if he had lain in ambush, returns with his cruel bonds; the more adventurous flowers are ruthlessly slain; the birds are dumb with amazement and sorrow; and all the voices of nature are again hushed. Life and death are now fiercely struggling; but the former, though for a while overborne, at length wins.

To this the spiritual world is not without its parallel. So it fell out in the experience of Duncan Matheson. His few days of enlargement and joy were followed by a weary season of bondage and misery. His song of triumph was quickly followed by the burning thirst of unsatisfied spiritual desire, the bitter waters of a *Marah* experience, and all the anguish and travail of the wilderness. It was as when the sun has just arisen upon some benighted traveller, and he is making his escape from fearful dangers amidst dazzling floods of light. Suddenly again it becomes pitch dark, and night without a star overshadows his path. During those years the young Christian's joy, if not also his faith, suffered an eclipse. Like a lamb bleating for its lost mother, he went about during those weary months bemoaning himself with piteous lamentations and sorrow. But a fighting faith is as precious as a resting faith, though not so pleasant; and stern battle is the way to victory.

“Gradually,” he says, “my joy began to abate. I had been soaring on the eagle wings of praise, but now my song failed. At any rate, I thought, I am free of sin; but, alas, I soon discovered that in my flesh dwelleth no good

thing. I could see two distinct principles at work in me—the flesh and the Spirit. To an old Christian of experience I complained that I was dead.

“‘Dead!’ said he, with a curious twinkle in his eye; ‘you are a curiosity. I never heard a dead man speak before. There comes nae a sigh frae a coffin, and they never cry feich in the grave. Ye’re nae dead, but feelin’ deadness. After having been dandled on the knees of consolation you must be weaned, and go and fecht the battles of the Lord.’ This gave me a little comfort, but only a little.

“Young converts live more by sense than faith, and they must be taught that Jesus Himself, and not the comforts He gives, is their life. The weaning time is a critical period; then it is a man’s Christian character is stamped. Skilful teachers are needed to show the workings of nature and grace, to separate the precious from the vile, so that he who begins in the Spirit may not be led away to seek perfection in the flesh. I was now in a wilderness, sorely tempted of the devil. The fountains of the great deep were broken up, Satan came down on my soul like a sweeping avalanche, and I was tempted to curse God and die. I staggered beneath my burden day and night for nearly two years. Terrible were the fiery darts with which I was assailed. Horrible and unutterable thoughts of God, of the Holy Ghost, and of Jesus, were injected into my mind. If I began to sing, the very note seemed to be changed into a blasphemy on the tip of my tongue, and many a time have I had to put my fingers in my ears and my hand on my mouth. These bolts of hell caused me indescribable anguish and sorrow, and never till I saw they were not mine but Satan’s did I get deliverance from them.

“Sometimes he tortured me about election; sometimes he suggested that my former joy was only the joy of the stony ground hearers; sometimes that I had fallen away, and that according to the Word of God in the Epistle to the Hebrews, chap. vi. 4-6, it was impossible for me to be renewed unto repentance. The dread of apostasy hung over me like a sword from which I could not escape. The journal of my spiritual life I burned, that there might be no record of my apostasy left behind me. Above all, I was tempted to believe I had committed the unpardonable sin—the sin against the Holy Ghost. ‘You have blasphemed,’ said the tempter one day. ‘Go and take your fill of the world; mercy is not for you.’ I left the house, but had only gone a little way when I was compelled to return. Taking up the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ I read a note, which said, ‘If you have any desire to be saved, if you wish you had not sinned against the Holy Ghost, you have not done it.’ I was somewhat relieved, and began afresh.

“When I struggled, Satan said it was of no use; when I rested, he taunted me with sloth, and said, ‘How can you get the blessing when you are sleeping?’ Sometimes he said, ‘Where is your joy? Are not wisdom’s ways ways of pleasantness? Her paths are paths of peace.’ I was tempted to Atheism, to

Unitarianism, and was continually urged to take life away. Oh the agony of those months! I suffered till my frame was sadly reduced. Often did hurry to the hill-side, and oftener to the banks of the river, and my weary wail, 'Oh that I knew where I might find Him!' mingled with the flow of the dark waters. But never was I desirous of giving up. Eternity was stamped on my eyeballs. I had seen a sight which dimmed the glory of all else.

“The cross, the cross! the Christian’s only glory,
I see the standard rise;
March on, march on! the cross of Christ before thee;
That cross all hell defies.
“The cross, the cross! redemption’s standard raising,
I see the banner wave;
Sing on the march, salvation’s Captain praising;
'Tis Christ alone can save.

“The crown, the crown! Oh, who at last shall gain it?
That cross a crown affords;
Press on, press on with courage to obtain it;
The battle is the Lord’s.’

“I had now and again sweet, short tastes of coming glory. I felt as if I could have struggled centuries to reach the goal at last. ‘I was persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.’ Though for the most part I groaned out, ‘O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ yet there were moments when I could say, ‘I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ Dark indeed was the night, and starless the sky, but hope bore me up, and I felt an unseen hand supporting me; and when the dark veil was for a little drawn aside, I could realize the verse of Cowper—

“God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps on the sea,
And rides upon the storm.’

A portion of the diary mentioned above escaped the fire. A few extracts from it will serve to illustrate his state of mind, and the fiery conflicts through which he was then passing. Perhaps it will encourage some poor struggler to hold on his way through fire and water till he gets into the “wealthy place.”

“January 2nd, 1847. When I awoke in the morning, all my thoughts were evil and good mixed; evil thoughts preponderating. Alas! what are my thoughts but evil? what my prayers but sin? what my desires but mixed with self? Were I left to my own heart I would perish. Throughout the day I have

thought awful thoughts, hard, wicked, unbelieving thoughts of God. Satan has been raging like a lion, seeking to devour me, my own heart helping him. When I think of these thoughts I can well say that God for one of them could justly cast me off. Prayed much for the Holy Spirit, without whose aid I can see and do nothing. Tried to rest all my thoughts on Jesus, but it is hard to do so. I am always running after something of my own. More settled just now (evening). Very much in need of a humble heart; clearer views of Jesus; a heart to acknowledge God in all things. May the Holy Spirit open the eyes of my understanding, lead me and guide me aright; for left to my own heart I would go astray. Enable me to cast my care and burden on Jesus, who can save me.

“January 3rd. Sabbath morning. Very much tormented with awful thoughts which I shudder at. I have a fearful heart that would dictate to the Creator of the universe. Very much tormented by Satan, who fills my tongue and imagination with curses and blasphemies. May God for Jesus’ sake, on whom I would rely, disappoint him.

“Went to church, my thoughts wandering, and very wicked thoughts rising up. Heard a discourse from Ps. xix. Set my secret faults before my face. Mr. Millar spoke well on presumptuous sin. Alas! how many have I committed even since the Spirit awakened me. It is of mercy I am not cast off. Truly God is long-suffering.

“Prayer-meeting in the afternoon. Thoughts away, but rather better staid than in the forenoon.

“Evening. Mr. Hill on Psalm xvii. The poor commit their way to God. Very good discourse. I would commit my way, guilty, weak, and unworthy as I am, to God through Jesus. O guide me, and give me grace to support me under every trial. Give me thy Spirit. Impart thy love, dear Lord Jesus, to my heart.

“January 4th. When I awoke, my mind confused, my imagination going after every evil. Truly the thoughts of the heart are only evil, and that continually. My mind throughout the day was a chaos of evil and good. How terribly fallen I am, for my mind is enmity against God. Awful thoughts were in my heart against Him. A great conflict going on in my mind, and I am unable in myself to submit my will to God. Oh that He would in mercy give me a humble heart, to see and acknowledge Him in all my ways, and to submit my will to his! I find it a very difficult matter to subdue self, my mind even taking pleasure in confessions. Give me, O Lord, the heart to ascribe glory, honour, and praise to Thee; for I have a heart that would say or think every evil. I would, guilty as I am, put my trust in Jesus. May his love shine into my heart, that I may be humbled and have true sorrow for sin.

“A few moments this evening of awful interest. Satan or my own heart is always putting much to my prayers, thus dictating to God. What a heart!

how rebellious! Teach me humility, O Lord. Give me a meek and lowly heart.

“January 5th. Confused thoughts, wicked in the extreme. Yet self-sufficiency. I cannot check my wicked thoughts, and my heart is very unwilling to acknowledge God. No human reason, no learning on earth can give me peace. Alas, my wisdom is a stumbling-block to me; my thoughts are so wicked, that at times they overwhelm me. Trying to trust all in Jesus, but I see it must be a divine faith, for a human faith can give no peace. Went to prayer-meeting, but found no good; yet resolved to follow on to know God. O Lord, give me thy Holy Spirit to reveal thy dear Son to my soul. Give me a humble, broken heart.

“O may thy Spirit seal my soul,
And mould me to thy will,
That my weak heart no more May stray,
But keep thy precepts still.’

“30th. The worst day I have ever had with the suggestions of Satan. Yet God has saved me. I need to be humbled at the foot of the cross. I have resolved in the strength of Jesus to be his. . . . Eternal life is worth struggling for. Lord, make me thine; bend my proud heart by thy Holy Spirit.

“31st. Sabbath. Thoughts mixed—good and evil. . . . Temptations and suggestions of Satan. Heard a sermon on the joys of heaven; was benefited, and quickened to go forward. Temptations are my grievous lot, but what are they all compared with the joys laid up for those that are tried and faithful?

“February 4th. Seeing more and more of my heart every day. Oh that I had faith to lean on Jesus.

“7th. Went to church; but oh, what corruption—what sin! How many idle thoughts. Nothing but sin in my heart. Meditation on the words of Jesus, ‘Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.’ This should strip us of all self-righteousness. O Lord, give me a heart to love Thee above all earthly things.”

Thus far the journal of the conflict. During this dreary period Duncan Matheson was learning the most difficult of lessons—“the just shall live by faith.” Mark the goodness of God. He was refreshed at the well before he began to ascend the Hill Difficulty. Ere he entered that dark Valley of Humiliation and engaged in fierce conflict with Apollyon, he was girded with truth and clad in mail. In his worst times he could remember the Lord from “the land of Jordan and of the Hermonites, from the hill Mizar;” the memory of his three happy, triumphant days, sustained him, and although deep was calling unto deep, he could still hope in God. Sometimes, indeed, the tried saint is kept from utter apostasy and atheism by the memory of a sweet experience on the Mount of Communion.

As yet it was only the dawn of grace. Night was passing and the day was coming in, though slowly and with clouds. In rude but majestic outline, invisible things were coming to view. He sees God; God is real. He is dealing with God, but God in his holiness rather than God in his love. He sees Jesus; but it is not so much Jesus revealed in the glass of the Word that he sees, as the image of Jesus faintly reflected on the troubled waters of his own heart. The Holy Ghost is real; but he marks his own grieving of the Spirit, rather than the Spirit's graciousness to him. Satan has become real, near, and terrible; but he is not yet seen as vanquished in the cross. Sin in its guilt and power is now to him a gigantic Upas, on whose branch his harp is hanging, and under whose shadow he seems doomed to sit, and weep, and die. Mark how the valiant struggler divides his charges between the devil and his own heart, giving to each a fair portion of the blame. He who knows sin knows also the devil; fools, knowing neither, make a mock of both. When a man is passing through this stage of religious experience, an awful, eternal importance attaches to the minutest element of his existence. He weighs his thoughts in a balance. He measures his feelings, affections, and motives by the broad standard of divine perfection. His words are not mere empty sounds, but winged messengers going before to judgment; and all his steps leave their impress on conscience one by one.

Those two years were spent on the hardest bench in Christ's school. That lowly seat of spiritual discipline has been occupied in turns by all the most distinguished servants of God. During the years preceding his conversion, he had been taught the mad and desperate opposition of the natural man to the grace of God. Now he learned how the flesh lusts against the Spirit; how legalism counterworks grace in the believer's heart; how it fetters the liberty, mars the joy, hinders the progress, disfigures the character, and lessens or even destroys the usefulness of the Christian. To one who was to teach multitudes the true way, all that painful experience was of prime importance. His mistakes should save many from similar errors; his miseries should diminish the misery of others. Our bitterest trials are our best lessons. Joseph studied statesmanship in prison. Moses found a Divinity Hall in the back side of the desert. Forty years in the wilderness made Joshua one of God's greatest soldiers, one of his bravest heroes. Saul's persecution did more to make David the king he was than Samuel's sacred oil. Elijah learned the Gospel in its "still small voice" in a cave. Jonah graduated in the whale's belly. Peter got his best lesson in evangelistic theology when he went out in the dark night to weep bitterly for his great sin. Paul was not conferring with flesh and blood during the time spent in Arabia. John went to the highest class in Patmos. The long agony of Luther has lessened the sorrows of millions. John Bunyan called more pilgrims into the King's high-

way from his dungeon than ever he did from his pulpit. And so of thousands more.

To the Christian and the preacher of Christ, a thorough knowledge of sin is of the highest importance. This knowledge, bitter but wholesome, Duncan Matheson was now learning. "I have found original sin in the Bible," said a student to Haldane. "Well," replied the latter: "but have you found it in your own heart?" Few know what it is to see all the terrible hell of man's depraved nature. To be let down into that abyss with the candle of the Lord in your hand, to see its bottomless depths of pride and passion, its tumultuous risings against law and holiness, its desperate rage against God, its Satanic challenges of the Divine Sovereignty, its insane atheisms, its blasphemous horrors, its cloud-covered delusions, its ambushed hosts of armed iniquities, and its infinite capability of engendering evils enough to waste the fairest world of God, and people many hells—to see all this and far more than words can convey, is not merely to learn the *doctrine*, but to know *the reality of sin*, so that the sense and memory of its nature, criminality, power, and destiny, are branded as with a red-hot iron upon the soul forever. This knowledge is beyond the ken of short-sighted professors and stone-blind hypocrites.

When such an one, like Luther, goes about for weary months or years bemoaning himself and crying piteously, "Oh, my sin! my sin!" shallow Christians and evil-doers ask, "What great crime has he committed? Surely he is living in gross sin." All the while the man is living a holy life, waging war against the very thought and possibility of evil; but "a sword is in his bones," and his "soul dwells among lions."

The young convert was pursuing holiness as a man runs for his life, but he was partly in error. "I can see," he says, "looking back on that period of my history, where exactly I stood. I had begun in the Spirit, and I wanted to be made perfect in the flesh. My spirit was most legal; I prayed continually, and if I lost a moment I tried to make it up as a man pays a debt. I had a scrupulous conscience, which brought me great torment. My eyes were fixed within myself, and my comfort was drawn from my frames. The Spirit's work in me was the ground of my peace and hope, rather than the work of Christ in our room. I did not see Jesus as my sanctification as well as my justification. I did not then know the meaning of this word as describing the secret of progressive holiness: 'We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.' Although I drew comfort from the person and work of Jesus, I did not live on Him. I was continually analysing my feelings, drawing comfort from what I thought was divine, and rejecting what was natural. Hence my hope rose and fell like a barometer. I remember one day going out to the Castle Park, expecting I should audibly hear a

voice from heaven assuring me that all my sins were forgiven. When in this attitude, the word came with power to my heart, 'Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.' Indescribable pangs tore my heart at that moment, and I almost felt I had rather be lost than go on in the way of believing. Immediately another passage of Scripture took forcible hold of me: 'See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh: for if they escaped not who refused Him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that speaketh from heaven "' (Heb. xii. 25).

From Huntly he went to Edinburgh, and wandered from church to church saying, "Saw ye Him whom my soul loveth?"—"They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him." In vain his search. Back again to Huntly he took his way for the purpose of celebrating the Lord's Supper, and showing forth the death of Jesus; but no relief came. "Never did criminal stand on the scaffold with more rueful countenance," he says, "than mine was as I sat at the Lord's table that day." He trembled lest his "blood should be mingled with his sacrifice." This "service was the service of the slave, not of the free." By and by, however, he came to know that justification realized is the great vantage ground in striving after personal holiness, and that a happy consciousness of acceptance in the Beloved is the great incentive to true obedience. He who joys in God his Saviour cannot fight against his divine Friend. The blood of Jesus brings purity in bringing peace. Grasping pardon you grasp holiness. He who receives Jesus receives his Spirit. Love springs from faith; and he who realizes most assuredly his standing in grace, walks most steadily in fellowship, works most cheerfully in obedience, and lives most freely in the liberties of holy joy. This lesson Matheson now learned. The two years' tempest shook the tree but did not uproot it. If the storm damaged the branches it strengthened the roots. The young Christian unlearned frames and learned faith. He learned to lean on the word of God, the bare word, and nothing but the word. He was taught to trust not in the Christ of his heart, but Christ in the Word. He was taught to "be strong" not in the grace in himself, but "in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." At length realizing that God was his salvation through his oneness with Jesus he could say:

"So nigh, so very nigh to God,
More near I cannot be;
For in the person of His Son
I am as near as He.
So dear, so very dear to God,
More dear I cannot be:
The love wherewith He loves His Son,
Such is His love to me."

Having been brought clearly to see the standing of the believer in Christ, he quickly attained a well-grounded assurance of salvation. He had given diligence to make his calling and election sure; but he had sought assurance in vain because he had sought it mainly by searching himself. This priceless jewel he found where all good is to be found, at the foot of the cross. Henceforth, although he did not cease to work out his own salvation with fear and trembling, he could always say, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day." This happy confidence in the Lord fitted him for the work of an evangelist, and sustained him amidst many labours and trials. The joy of the Lord was his strength, and true of him were these lines:

"There are in this loud and stunning tide
Of human care and crime,
With whom the melodies abide
Of the everlasting chime;
Who carry music in their heart
Through dusky lane and wrangling mart,
Plying their daily task with busier feet,
Because their secret souls a holy strain repeat."

During this period, in his insatiable hunger for the truth, he read incessantly, and devoured large and substantial meals of the good old Puritanic theology. Owen, Baxter, Howe, and the other divines of that age were his delight. Thus he laid in a good store for days to come, and treasured much precious seed to be afterwards scattered broadcast over Scotland. In the course of his reading, he stumbled on the writings of Huntington, and for a season was led away into the dreary wilderness of hyper-Calvinism, where some poor souls seem doomed to wander all their days, perhaps as a punishment for their hair-splitting or their spiritual pride. For a time he was bound in the strait jacket of this form of fatalism. He dared not speak to every one of the love of God, lest he should give encouragement to one who was not elect. After a while he discovered his error, and was led to see that to close the door of the universal call of the Gospel is to close the door of salvation against the elect themselves, since the only warrant to believe is simply the general invitations addressed to sinners of mankind. He noticed that these ultra-Calvinists are generally unpractical, and much given to preaching in their prayers. When one of this class was leading the devotion by an elaborate theological discussion, someone, as Matheson used to tell, probably enough himself, touched the sleeve of the pious theorist, saying, "Ask something from Him." With brusque, quaint irony he was wont to say, "Ah! I see you have taken the divine sovereignty under your special patron-

age and care, but I have no time for chopping logic with you; I want to win souls.”

The insight he obtained into the subtle workings of the human heart during his long conflict prepared him for the work of an evangelist. He could discover at a glance the whereabouts of an inquirer. He was taught to distinguish between mere blind alarm and genuine conviction. If the inquirer was seeking more conviction, instead of seeking Christ, he could point out the error in a word. Pride, pretence, legalism, fear of man, and unbelief in its varied forms, he could clearly expose, and so remove stumbling-blocks out of the way. To the despairing he could say, “I was once where you are now;” and from his own experience he could speak wisely and lovingly to those deeply afflicted ones who think they have sinned the unpardonable sin.

During this period of discipline he learned to pray without ceasing. In company, on the street, in the railway train, in the bustle of business, amidst the solemn fervours of his preaching, and in the very torrent of his own quaint, racy, picturesque talk in social life—in short, everywhere and in all things, his faith went up to heaven in quick, pointed, battle-like cries. When others were preaching we have often heard him praying thus, “Help, Lord, help! Give the blessing, and save many!”

Such, then, were some of the lessons taught him by the Holy Spirit during those two hard and bitter years. A thorough knowledge of sin, of the workings of the human heart, and of the devices of the devil; a clear view of the ground of the believer’s standing before God, victory over his adversaries, assurance of salvation, and the habit of praying always—these were precious fruits in his own experience and through his work as an evangelist seeds of blessing to others, which he scattered far and wide.